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TSA Would Allow Sharp Objects on Airliners

Screener to Focus More on Bombs

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A new plan by the Transportation Security Administration would allow airline passengers to bring scissors and other sharp objects in their carry-on bags because the items no longer pose the greatest threat to airline security, according to sources familiar with the plans.

In a series of briefings this week, TSA Director Edmund S. "Kip" Hawley told aviation industry leaders that he plans to announce changes at airport security checkpoints that would allow scissors less than four inches long and tools, such as screwdrivers, less than seven inches long, according to people familiar with the TSA's plans. These people spoke on condition of anonymity because the TSA intends to make the plans public Friday.

"We'll be announcing a number of new initiatives that will have both a positive security and customer service impact," said TSA spokeswoman Yolanda Clark, who declined to comment on the details of the announcement. The plans must be approved by the Homeland Security Department and the Office of Management and Budget.

Faced with a tighter budget and morale problems among its workforce, the TSA says its new policy changes are aimed at making the best use of limited resources. Homeland Security Department officials are increasingly concerned about airports' vulnerability to suicide bomb attacks. TSA officials now want airport screeners to spend more of their time looking for improvised explosive

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devices rather than sharp objects.

The TSA's internal studies show that carry-on-item screeners spend half of their screening time searching for cigarette lighters, a recently banned item, and that they open 1 out of every 4 bags to remove a pair of scissors, according to sources briefed by the agency. Officials believe that other security measures now in place, such as hardened cockpit doors, would prevent a terrorist from commandeering an aircraft with box cutters or scissors.

However, many flight attendants do not believe sharp objects should be allowed on board. They argue that even though such items would not enable another Sept. 11, 2001-style hijacking, the items could be used as weapons against passengers or flight-crew members. "TSA needs to take a moment to reflect on why they were created in the first place -- after the world had seen how ordinary household items could create such devastation," said Corey Caldwell, spokeswoman for the Association of Flight Attendants, which has more than 46,000 members. "When weapons are allowed back on board an aircraft, the pilots will be able to land the plane safely but the aisles will be running with blood."

Charles Slepian, an aviation security consultant based in New York, said the TSA's proposed changes fail to take into account the safety of passengers and cabin crew. "Whenever you are serving alcohol, you have a double duty to those who are present to protect them from someone who goes off the deep end," Slepian said. "If we allow people to carry things that are really deadly weapons on board airplanes, we're inviting trouble."

The TSA has been reviewing its list of prohibited items since last summer and has debated whether throwing stars (a martial-arts weapon), ice picks and knives should be allowed back on board, according to TSA documents. In past briefings with reporters, Hawley said the agency was considering other changes that would make the airline security system less predictable. For example, he said that he was unsure whether it makes sense for passengers to routinely remove their shoes at the security checkpoint. He said he also plans to incorporate more bomb-sniffing dogs in airports.

Other changes are aimed at improving morale among the agency's 43,000 employees, whose number has been cut from 55,000 three years ago. Screener

turnover has reached 23 percent and many employees who were recruited to the agency in the hopes of jump-starting a federal government career have not had a raise in three years.

Last month, the TSA changed the federal job classification of its airport screeners to "transportation security officers," a title that puts them more on par with customs or immigration officers, Clark said. Several aviation officials briefed by the TSA said the plan is to allow security screeners to eventually become federal air marshals, who are now part of the TSA. Clark declined to elaborate on those plans other than to say that "it opens up new career opportunities" for screeners.

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